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SUBJECT: PAKISTAN MEDIA REACTION: MARCH 19, 2009

Summary: A New York Times' report that President Obama and his top aides are "considering expanding the American covert operations against Taliban leaders to Balochistan" dominated headlines in all newspapers on Thursday. All newspapers also reported that Pakistan Foreign Office spokesman "downplayed" the report by terming it as "speculative." Foreign Minister Qureshi's statement affirming that the "U.S. will address (Pakistan's) concerns over drone attacks" received prominent coverage. Reports of a "militant attack on Malakand University killing four cops and a security guard" were also highlighted. Several major dailies reported that the "kidnappers of a Canadian journalist have threatened to kill her if their demands were not met by March 30."

Newspapers ran editorials on a host of subjects such as the security situation, aftermath of the restoration of judiciary, intelligence sharing on Mumbai attacks, and so on. Commenting on the NYT's report about possible drone attacks in Balochistan, the populist daily, "Khabrain," cautioned that "such steps will increase existing hatred against the United States." The centrist national daily, "The News," observed that the "mood may be changing in Washington with respect to the government of Pakistan, as there are reports in the U.S. media that a "re-think is on regarding Nawaz Sharif." The center-right national daily, "The Nation," noted that the "Obama Administration seems particularly sensitive to the public sentiments and unless he (President Zardari) comes half-way to make up with a major political force like the PML-N, he would fail to strengthen democracy." End Summary.

News Stories

"U.S. Considering Strikes In Balochistan: NYT" "Dawn" (03/19)

"President Obama and his national security advisers are considering expanding the American covert war in Pakistan far beyond the tribal areas and striking at a different centre of Taliban power in Balochistan, where top Taliban leaders are orchestrating attacks into southern Afghanistan, says a report in the New York Times."

"Pakistan Dismisses U.S. Report On Air Strikes" "The Nation" (03/19)

"Pakistan on Wednesday asked the United States to review its policy of drone attacks while dismissing as speculative an alarming U.S. media report that Washington is considering to expand these attacks beyond the tribal area to Balochistan Province, said Foreign Minister Shah Mehmood Qureshi, while addressing a press conference

in Islamabad at the Foreign Office."

"U.S. To Address Concerns Over Drone Attacks: Qureshi" "Dawn"
(03/19)

"Foreign Minister Shah Mehmood Qureshi said on Wednesday the U.S. had agreed to discuss Pakistan's concerns over drone attacks on its territory during the second round of regional policy review meetings scheduled in May 6-7."

"Balochistan Has No Safe havens, Says FC" "Dawn" (03/19)

"Inspector General of Frontier Corps Maj-Gen. Saleem Nawaz has described as baseless reports that Mullah Omar and other Taliban leaders and militants were hiding in Balochistan and said the Taliban did not have political and tribal support in the province."

"Balochs To Resist Any U.S. Attack: Jamali" "The News" (03/19)

"Former Prime Minister Mir Zafarullah Khan Jamil on Wednesday stressed the need for unity to face American threat of attacking Balochistan, saying that the nation will foil such evil designs, while talking to a private TV channel."

"Congressmen Oppose Drone Attacks In Pakistan" "Dawn" (03/19)

"A bipartisan group of 15 U.S. congressmen warned the U.S. administration on Wednesday that increased U.S. military activities in Pakistan would have dangerous consequences for the entire region. In a signed letter to President Barak Obama, the lawmakers also opposed U.S. drone attacks in Pakistan, saying that it's the continuation of the Bush administration's policies towards the region."

"U.S., Others Keen To Help Pakistan, Says Qureshi" "The News"
(03/19)

"The government sent a strong appeal to the opposition leaders to find a democratic way forward and take all outstanding issues to the floor of parliament rather than on the streets. Political stability is the key to success, progress and prosperity. Foreign policy is above party interest and the need of the hour is national consensus. If we want to take advantage of this situation then please I appeal to all Pakistani politicians to strengthen my hands, otherwise I cannot argue Pakistan's case," Foreign Minister Shah Mehmood Qureshi told a hurriedly-called news conference at the Foreign Office. Qureshi pleaded that at this moment all important world capitals are looking at Pakistan sympathetically and are willing to help it economically and politically."

"Haqqani Seeks Fast-Track U.S. Assistance For Pakistan" "The News"
(03/19)

"Pakistan's Ambassador to the United States Husain Haqqani has called on Washington to bolster the democratic government's concerted campaign against extremist threat with fast-track provision of socio-economic assistance as it would help efforts to enlist the much-needed widespread public support for the cause. Taking part in a discussion on Pakistan in PBS TV channel's Charlie Rose Program, the envoy acknowledged the moves underway in Washington on expanding economic assistance for his key South Asian country."

"India-Pakistan Differences Loom Over Afghan Talks" "Dawn" (03/19)

"Unabated bilateral tensions between India and Pakistan together with their divergent approaches towards a solution to the mess in Kabul are expected to distract the attention from, rather than put the focus on, constructive discussions on Afghanistan at two international conferences this month that are to discuss new strategies for the war-torn nation, reports indicated on Wednesday."

"Five Killed In Attack On Malakand University" "Dawn" (03/19)

"Four policemen and a watchman of the University of Malakand were killed and three others suffered wounds when a group of armed miscreants attacked a police mobile van at the main entrance of the

University of Malakand at Chakdara in the Lower Dir district at the wee hours of Wednesday, official sources and eyewitnesses told 'Dawn.'

"Life of Kidnapped Canadian Woman Journalist In Danger" "The News" (03/19)

"Taliban militants holding the Canadian woman journalist, Khadija Abdul Qahaar, in North Waziristan tribal region Wednesday threatened to kill her if their demands were not met by the end of March.... The Taliban demanded two million dollars for her release."

"Deadline Set For Solecki Ends" "Dawn" (03/19)

"The Baloch Liberation United Front, which claims to have kidnapped UN official John Solecki, has yet to announce a new deadline for acceptance of its demands, as its earlier deadline passed on Wednesday night."

"UNHCR Seeks Direct Talks With Kidnappers" "Dawn" (03/19)

"The United Nations is concerned about the health of its abducted official John Solecki and is making all efforts to gain his safe release, an official of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees said. A statement issued by the UNHCR in Islamabad on Wednesday said that the world body was willing to speak directly to Mr. Solecki's kidnappers in the spirit of being ready to listen and to find a safe way for his release."

"Most Of Balochistan Libration United Front (BLUF) Demands Already Met, Says Malik" "The News" (03/19)

"Advisor to Prime Minister on Interior Rehman Malik has said that the government was reviewing the demands made by captors of UNHCR official John Solecki. Talking to Balochistan Chief Minister Nawab Aslam Raisani in Islamabad on Wednesday, Malik said most of the demands of Balochistan Libration United Front (BLUF), that claimed responsibility for the kidnapping of the UNHCR official, have already been fulfilled."

"Four Security Men Killed In Dir Gunfight" "The Nation" (03/19)

"Four security men were killed and fQr others wounded Wednesday in a gunfight with militants in a northwest town near Swat Valley, police said."

"Armed Militants Patrol Peshawar Roads" "The News" (03/19)

"Militants armed with rocket launchers and other sophisticated weapons patrolled the Peshawar city roads on Wednesday, scaring the commuters and dwellers of the nearby towns. It is learned that suspected militants in around 12 double-cabin pickups patrolled the Ring Road and Bara Road in the afternoon."

"Militants Force Closure Of CD Shops In Mardan" "The News" (03/19)

"Militants' threats have forced hundreds of compact disc (CDs) dealers in Mardan district to pack up. A survey conducted by The News revealed that so far over 100 music and CD shops had been blown up in various areas of the district."

"Bomb Damages NATO Equipment Near Chaman Border (Quetta)" "The News" (03/19)

"A suspected militant on Wednesday hurled a grenade at a NATO supply truck carrying machinery destined for Afghanistan, damaging the equipment, police said."

"Oil Tanker Blown Up" "The News" (03/19)

"A tanker transporting oil to NATO forces in Afghanistan was blown up near Michini area (Landi Kotal) when an explosive device placed beneath it exploded on Wednesday."

"NWFP Govt. Asks Swat Judges Not To Attend Courts Over Security Concerns" "Daily Times" (03/19)

"The government on Wednesday directed the judges of subordinate

judiciary of the Peshawar High Court in Swat not to attend courts and restrict themselves to their houses due to security concerns, a civil judge cum judicial magistrate in Swat told 'Daily Times' on Wednesday."

Editorials/Op-eds

"Plan To Extend Drone Attacks," an editorial in the Lahore-based populist center-right Urdu daily "Khabrain" (cir. 50,000) (03/19)

"According to a press report in America, President Obama and the National Security Advisor are planning to widen the scope of American drone attacks and want to include attacks on Taliban hideouts in Quetta and other parts of Balochistan in this plan. America should keep in mind that such steps will increase existing hatred against America."

"A Change In Perception," an editorial in the centrist national English daily "The News" (cir. 55,000) (03/19)

"The mood may be changing in Washington with respect to the government in Pakistan. In the U.S. media there have been several reports that a re-think is on regarding Mian Nawaz Shairf.... The current re-think we hear so much of comes at a time when in the U.S. Senate there are calls for more aid to be extended to Pakistan to prevent the country spiraling into turmoil. Pakistan needs economic stability. But this can come only when its allies overseas and also people within the country have greater faith in the abilities of its leaders. The perception that governance is weak and ineffective, whether accurate or inaccurate, adds to our problems."

"Basis Of Patch-Up," an editorial in the center-right national English daily "The Nation" (cir. 20,000) (03/19)

"President Zardari should know that his standing, not only with the people but also with the U.S. and the rest of the world, has markedly suffered as a result of the lawyers' movement. Unlike Mr. Bush, the Obama Administration seems particularly sensitive to the public sentiment and unless he comes half-way to make up with a major political force like the PML(N), he would fail to strengthen democracy."

"Peace, For Now," an op-ed by Ahmed Quraishi in the centrist national English daily "The News" (cir. 55,000) (03/19)

"A failed political system won't change itself. Our ultimate goal here should be the type of political system and not how it comes. Pakistan needs a political system where political parties are democratized and party leaderships are rotated through internal ballot... Without this kind of change, the existing system will continue to generate crises and encourage foreign intervention. Here, it must be noted that the original sin of disturbing the Pakistani political process is born by the United States and Britain. The attempts at political manipulation by both countries in Pakistan as far back as 2006 have destabilized Pakistan. Their latest intervention might have turned to be positive but it was designed to protect their interests inside the Pakistani government."

"A Bomber In Hand," an editorial in the centrist national English daily "The News" (cir. 55,000) (03/19)

"Somewhere in our country, young men and boys are recruited as suicide bombers, carefully trained and brain-washed into believing they are acting for the sake of religion before being released into cities. Only when we uncover the system behind this will it become possible to move effectively towards stopping the bombings."

"Rationale For Speedy Justice," an editorial in the Islamabad-based rightist English daily "Pakistan Observer" (cir. 5,000) (03/19)

"The apprehensions and opposition of the Western circles is quite understandable but it is regrettable that some domestic quarters too were in the forefront of the campaign to malign the understanding.... In normal circumstances, the civil suit might have taken years to settle but the Qazi disposed of the case just in one day without any cost to the litigants. There were no fees for

lawyers, no formal FIR and no delays. The Qazi received application on plain paper, called witnesses and decided the case instantly. That is what the people of the region have been demanding on the basis of their experience of the past."

"Don't Delay In Resolving Issues," an editorial in the leading mass circulation centrist Urdu daily "Jang" (cir. 300,000) (03/19)

"It is a very alarming situation that the TNSM chief Sufi Mohammad has stopped the judges in Swat to come to the office. And now this cleric has moved ahead and prevented the lawyers and attorneys too from pleading the cases on behalf of their clients, and described this profession as contrary to the Shariat laws. In this state of affairs, the lawyers in Swat are left with no other option except to quit this profession, or leave Swat valley. So the government authorities must find a way out of this sticky situation, and resolve this issue immediately."

"Don't Ignore Us," an editorial in the second-largest, center-right nationalist Urdu daily "Nawa-i-Waqt" (cir. 125,000) (03/19)

"American administration has approved the sale of eight ocean surveillance aircraft worth \$2.10 billion to India. America has friendship with Pakistan, but actually it wants to see Pakistan militarily weak.... Pakistan should use diplomatic channels to raise the issue as to why balance of power is being disturbed with the supply of military equipment to India."

"Need For Dialogue," an editorial in the Karachi-based center-left independent national English daily "Dawn" (cir. 55,000) (03/19)

"Of course it is yet to be established that the LT was behind the Mumbai or Lahore attacks. Still, it is clear that our biggest enemies lie within. There are other reasons too why the architects of the Mumbai carnage must be brought to book at the earliest. Without greater strides on this count, progress is unlikely on the core issue of Kashmir and other lingering disputes such as Siachen and the demarcation of maritime borders."
Patterson